

Selfies

What is a selfie?

A selfie is a photograph of a person which has been taken by themselves. The photograph may be of that one person, or that person with other people, usually friends or celebrities. The word 'selfie' was coined in 2002 in Australia; there are lots of new related words, like 'belfie' (a selfie of one's buttocks), 'helfie' (a selfie of one's hair) and 'welfie' (a selfie taken at a workout session in a gym). 'Selfie' was the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year in 2013.

Although selfies have become extremely common in the last few decades, they are in fact not new. The first selfie was taken in 1839 by a man called Robert Cornelius, who snapped himself outside his lamp shop (see image). Since then, selfies have been taken throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, becoming increasingly popular with advances in technology, especially mobile phone cameras.



Why do people take selfies?

Selfies are often taken when there is something that the person wants to record or commemorate: for example, if the person is in a special location or outside a famous landmark, or if the person has met a celebrity at a meet and greet. Many people take selfies when they are out with their friends, so that they can post them online for other people to see what they have been doing. It's also very common for people to take selfies to show off a new look to their online community of friends and family on social media.

There has been some criticism of people who take lots of selfies, especially the generation of younger people sometimes known as the Instagram Generation. Critics of selfies complain that they encourage people to be self-centred, narcissistic, materialistic, and image-obsessed. There is a concern that selfies encourage people to objectify themselves and can have a significant impact on mental health. For example, the focus on physical looks and stereotyped ideas of beauty can lead to body image issues.

However, there are some responses to the criticism. One response is that selfies are a form of self portrait. People have been doing self portraits since the earliest times; for

example, there is evidence of self portraiture from Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece. The need to represent oneself is clearly a human instinct that runs deep.

What are the benefits of selfies?

Selfies can be an enjoyable way to express oneself; to create happy memories; to create an image for oneself on social media; to show a particular identity; to bond with friends; to get noticed; to promote a good cause; to spread humour, to name but a few positives.

What are the dangers of selfies?

The same dangers apply to selfies as to anything personal that is posted online. For example, you have to be very careful about who can see the photograph as it may end up in the hands of people that you never intended to see it. Once it is online, it could be saved by anybody and used for their own purposes. You may have very little control over where it goes, who uses it and what they do with it. For example, once you upload a photo to Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram, these companies own your image and can use it without asking you. By using any of these social media platforms, you are automatically consenting to your image being used in this way.

Posting selfies can reveal information about yourself that you don't want people to know, for example where you are, where you've been, and who's been with you. This could put you in danger in some circumstances; for example, if there's someone trying to track you down or looking to exploit young people. It is therefore very important to make sure you have strict privacy settings on anything you post online.

Also, while selfies can be fun, the criticism about promoting poor mental health and body image problems is still valid. In the same way that beauty magazines and adverts have been widely criticised for promoting a harmful 'ideal' image of beauty, selfies and social media can be part of the same problem.

There is also a condition known as 'selfitis', which started out as a hoax, but has since been medically recognised. Selfitis is when a person shows abnormally high or compulsive levels of selfie-taking. Sufferers of selfitis feel that they need to take selfies in order to increase their confidence, boost their mood, compete with people online and 'fit in'. As with other addictions, it can be treated in order to help the person to deal with their compulsive behaviours.